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Changing our Understanding of Organizational Change: A Discourse-based Approach *

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the potential of an interpretive, discourse-based orientation to studying and managing organizational change. It proposes a framework that takes note of the social construction of organizational reality, different levels of discourse, prevailing narratives, power processes, alternative discourses, reflection, multi-modality, and the iteration and recursivity of discourse. Further, the framework offers significant cross-cultural applicability across non-western and western organizational settings.

KEY WORDS: organizational discourse, organizational change, interpretative perspective, multi-modality, culture.

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Introduction

This article seeks to provide an alternative understanding of organizational change to that which dominates current research by directing attention to language and other communicative practices among organizational actors, and by building on existing scholarly examinations of the role of discourse in effecting organizational change.

The article will first discuss the recent emergence of an interpretivist orientation to the study of organizational phenomena in the social sciences, as well as some key concepts in the study of organizational discourse. Next, it describes an analytical framework for understanding how discourse influences change processes and outcomes (Grant & Marshak, 2011). In doing so it seeks to extend this framework where it draws on the concept of multi-modal discourse and considers the framework's cross-cultural implications. The article concludes with a discussion of how the extended framework might be applied in ways that can benefit the study and implementation of organizational change.

The Interpretivist Approach to Studying Organizations

During the early 20th century a common metaphor for organizations was that of a machine. Such a perspective encouraged a conceptualization of the organization as comprising knowable and stable components, and identifiable cause-effect relationships that can be studied to determine how to fix problems of productivity and efficiency. From the middle of the twentieth century this perspective was increasingly displaced by the perspective of an organization as an open system. Influenced by, for example, Von Bertalanffy's (1968) work on biological systems, this perspective emphasises adaptation as well as congruence and alignment between an organization and its environment, and sees organizations as more dynamic and responsive to external changes. Researchers and change agents operating from this perspective expect that, given enough time and resources for diagnosis, it is possible to identify existing cause-effect relationships, which will help nurture a poor performing organization back to health.

Table 1: Perspectives of Organizational Change

Perspective:	Mechanistic	Biological	Interpretative
Period:	Early 20th century	Mid 20th century	Late 20th century/ early 21st century
Underpinning metaphor:	Machine	Living organism	Conversation/ discourse
Organizational problem:	Problem cause identifiable if enough time/ resources	Problem cause not always identifiable	What is seen as problem is socially negotiated
Purpose of org. change:	Efficiency or effectiveness	Fit, congruence, alignment	New and more useful insights
Role of change agent:	Engineering	Nurturing, gardening	Meaning-making
Change approach:	- Fix what is broken - Tangible, episodic and discrete process	- Make healthy - Modify the system to achieve new balance	- Shape the discourse - Participation, reflection

In recent years an interpretivist orientation to the study of organizational phenomena has started to emerge. This perspective approaches organizations as comprising conversations through which organizational reality is socially constructed by groups of actors. The interpretive orientation is aligned with, among others, constructionist and post modern perspectives, culture studies and critical management studies (Grant & Iedema, 2005). Importantly, given the focus of this article, it is also an orientation that is highly apparent among scholars studying organizational discourse (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004b).

Consistent with the shift in orientation towards interpretivist, especially discourse-based, understandings of organizations there has been a major shift in how we think about and study organizational change. In order to understand the exact nature of this shift, we now turn to discussing four key concepts associated with discourse-based studies of organization.

Key Concepts of Organizational Discourse Studies

Discourse: Organizational discourse studies consider talking, writing and other modes of communication to construct organizational reality rather than simply reflecting it (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005). That is, discourse brings objects or practices (e.g. organizational change) into being through the production, dissemination and consumption of texts (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004a; Mumby & Clair, 1997). Discourse involves the negotiation of meaning among different organizational stakeholders with different views and interests, who use power and power processes to create, privilege and affirm discourses that advantage their interests and preferred view of the world over another group or individual (Hardy & Phillips, 2004).

Text: Discourses are constituted by sets of texts. These texts are 'multi-modal' (Iedema, 2007; Kress, 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) and include speech and writing (e.g. conversation and dialogue, narrative and storytelling), visual representations (e.g. art, design), and cultural artefacts (e.g. custom and practice, symbolism). These modes can create separate messages or reinforce the same message through different modes (Floris, Grant, & Cutcher, 2013).

Context: The temporal, historical and social contexts in which a particular discourse arises determines how and why its meanings are produced, as well as its effects (Keenoy & Oswick, 2004). A particular discourse is itself constituted by other discourses and the texts therein; thus notions of intertextuality come into play (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Keenoy & Oswick, 2004). The negotiation of meaning of any particular organizational phenomenon unfolds through a complex interplay of both socially and historically produced texts that are part of a continuous, iterative and recursive process (Alvesson, 2000; Grant & Hardy, 2004).

Conversation: A conversation is a set of texts that is produced as part of a dialogue between two or more people that are linked together temporally (Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004). A focus on conversation highlights the ongoing often recursive and iterative processes through which change is enacted over time (Ford & Ford, 1995).

These four concepts are then critical to understanding a discursive orientation.

They underpin the many discourse-based studies of organizations that have been published in recent years and which have contributed to the emergence of the field of organizational discourse studies (Grant et al., 2004b). Specifically, they inform the discourse-based model of organizational change outlined in the next section.

A Discourse-based Model of Change

The discourse-based model of change is based on eight (one core and seven secondary) premises. The model draws on and extends the work of Grant and Marshak (2011), where it emphasises the importance of considering the above discussed multi-modality of discourse and the texts therein.

Discourse Constructs Organizational Reality

The core premise of the model is that basic assumptions about organizing and organizational change are created, sustained, and over time transformed through discourse (Barrett et al., 1995). Therefore, the way organizational phenomena are framed and talked about plays a significant role in shaping how researchers, change agents, impacted employees and other stakeholders think about and respond to organizational change. In short, discourse constructs organizational reality, and changing the discourse does not merely change how people think or talk about an organization, it changes the organization itself.

There can be Different Levels of Change-related Discourse

Where a change-related discourse is apparent at any one of intrapersonal, personal, interpersonal, organizational or socio-cultural levels, it must be considered as linked to, and influenced by, other discourses operating at one or more of the other levels. As a consequence, lasting organizational change may require changing the discourse at multiple levels. For example, mental maps and models at an intrapersonal level may conflict with the frames that are propagated as part of an organizational change program, and slow down or hinder adoption of strategic innovation (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2007). Also, the discursive activities of a specific group of actors influences how conflict, negotiation, roles, norms, and cliques manifest themselves (Carroll & Payne, 1991; Hamilton, 1997; O'Connor & Adams, 1999; Woodilla, 1998), and whether or not organizational change is facilitated or impeded.

These different levels of discourse do not suggest a hierarchy, and a particular discourse may be interwoven across multiple levels simultaneously. This also means that no ready formula is professed as to the most effective way to drive change (e.g. 'start with efforts to change the discourse on level x; then proceed to y; etc.'). Rather, a change agent may need to devise a pragmatic approach across different levels of discourse-based on organization and context specific opportunities in order to develop the momentum necessary for sustainable change.

Prevailing Narratives of Change are Constructed Through Conversations

Narratives are textual devices that focus on common themes or issues and that link a set of ideas or a series of events (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997; Gabriel, 2004; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Ricoeur, 1983). These narratives may be used to make sense of change, legitimate change (Brown, 1998), or to envision potential future realities (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Dunford & Jones, 2000). Change processes and outcomes are influenced by the governing narratives that are constructed and disseminated through conversation. Therefore, a discourse-based model of change must take note of narratives and how they are propagated through conversations and by and among which organizational actors.

Power Processes Shape the Dominant Discourse About Change

Organizations are political sites (Mumby, 2004), and power dynamics shape the dominant or privileged discourse about change, which in turn influences change processes and outcomes. A particularly helpful study - one that assists in understanding the relationship of power and discourse in the context of organizational change - is provided by Hardy and Phillips (2004). These researchers look at how power and discourse have a mutually constitutive relationship. They go on to show that the ability of a particular individual or group to produce and disseminate influential discourses will be impacted by whether they are able to draw on: formal power, critical resources, network links; and discursive legitimacy (the ability to produce a discourse that is supported or endorsed by other people who by virtue of their number or position validate its dissemination and extend its reach) (Hardy & Phillips, 2004, pp. 306-307).

The mutually constitutive relationship of discourse and power can be seen to be

significant to change processes in several respects. For example, an analysis of the failed acquisition of Rio Tinto by BHP Billiton showed how actors structured the acquisition discourse in a way that reflected the interests of decision makers they were trying to persuade (Floris et al., 2013). In doing this, the discourse reinforced the power of these decision makers. Such processes involve the selective use and manipulation of information to construct a narrative that legitimises a proposed strategic change and results in the differential distribution of advantage among individuals and organizations (Fairclough, 1992; Mumby & Clair, 1997).

Important Alternative Discourses of Change Will Exist

Discourses may exist that differ from the prevailing discourses about change within an organization (Ford & Ford, 2009; Shaw, 2002). These may be expressed as outright resistance or as discourses that express denial, ambivalence, or new and different perspectives about the organization and change (Piderit, 2000; Scott & Jaffe, 2004). While they may hinder change efforts, they can also be used by change agents in ways that work to the benefit of change. First, they may be helpful in identifying why change has been failing (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Second, alternative discourses may help frame new shared meanings and change mindsets that help facilitate change (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Gergen, Gergen, & Barrett, 2004; Marshak & Grant, 2008). Consequently, as alternative discourses can either hinder or help facilitate change and its outcomes, they must be identified and carefully managed.

Discourses of Change are Iterative and Recursive

Discourses of change are, over time, produced, disseminated and consumed as a continuous, iterative and recursive process. Changes to the meanings that these discourses convey, along with the socially constructed organizational realities, agreements and mindsets that they construct, take place as part of this process. This means, for example, that the past, current and future of the organization is not described, but reconstructed in each discursive event (Keenoy & Oswick, 2004). Each new iteration must take note of previous constructions and, in turn, will therefore influence future constructions. While this recursivity may provide stability for an organizational narrative, others have emphasized how such narratives may adapt and alter over time as actors reflect on, interpret, and react to the change itself (Brown

& Humphreys, 2003; Vaara, 2002).

Researchers and Change Agents Must Reflect on Their Own Discourses

Reflexivity on the part of researchers and change agents in relation to the discourses of change that they are involved in constituting and promulgating is important since these discourses may influence change processes and outcomes (Doolin, Grant, & Thomas, 2013; Ford et al., 2008). The need for reflexivity extends across the discourse-based model of change. For example, it may involve carefully considering the implications of changing conversations, narratives or texts as part of changing discourse. Further, reflexivity is also desirable in relation to the different levels at which a change related discourse occurs, the alternative discourses that exist, the need to adapt to different audiences, the power dynamics and interests that are served or disadvantaged by particular change discourses, and the role that a researcher or change agent plays as participant in a change related discourse. Also, as will be explored next, discourses are enacted using a broad range of modalities, and researchers and change agents must reflect on the role that is played by different modalities in a change discourse.

Discourses are Multi-modal

Recent studies argue that text is not limited to linguistic modes (i.e. speech and writing) and have advanced our understanding of a broad range of modalities that are used in the realization of social goals and purposes (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Iedema, 2003, 2007; Kress, 2010). This range includes a wide variety of visual representations (e.g., graphs, maps, pictures, videos, font type), cultural artefacts (e.g. architecture, dress codes, technology), and other forms of meaning making (e.g. financial models, spatial location, gestures) through which discourses are enacted (see e.g. Grant et al., 2004a; Jacobs & Heracleous, 2007; Royce & Bowcher, 2006; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). For example, Roberts et al (2006) describe how the tone, gestures or even mood of a messenger may convey meaning during meetings between fund managers and company executives.

Adopting a multi-modal perspective of text 'amounts to a profound reorientation' (Kress, 2010, p.79) of our understanding of discourses of change. Instead of only taking note of speech and writing it becomes critical to consider other modes to understand how

organizational actors express, negotiate and influence meaning as part of organizational change processes. For example, different levels of discourse may be enacted using a different combination of linguistic devices, visual representations or cultural artefacts. Narratives of change take shape in multi-modal conversations, and counter narratives may depend in part on different modes. Also, dominant discourse about change may be buttressed by overlapping or complementing power dynamics across different modes.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) and Kress (2010) show that each mode has a unique set of characteristics or 'affordances'. These affordances influence what may count as a distinct mode. For example, affordances of speech include rhythm, pace, volume, intonation, accent, silence; affordances of writing include permanence, blank space, punctuation marks, and font (type, size, and colour). Therefore, even language should not be treated as a singular mode (Kress, 2010). Examples of non-linguistic modes may include physical objects, with affordances like hardness, size, placement, shape, colour; imagery with affordances like positioning of elements, depictions/ icons, framed space; and gestures, with affordances like their ephemeral (temporary, imprecise) nature, and that they generally carries less weight than for example writing (see e.g. Floris et al., 2013; Gordon & Grant, 2006). Different affordances are suited to doing different meaning-making work, and the choice of modes may shape how actors socially construct organizational reality and the need for change. Previous research suggests that the logic of organizational change may be expressed most clearly using speech and writing (Hellgren et al., 2002; Tienari, Vaara, & Bjorkman, 2003; Vaara & Tienari, 2002). However, other modes like imagery, music and location may be more effective to express emotion or draw on authority (Floris et al., 2013). This suggests that researchers or change agents, who only consider speech and writing, may overstate the importance of logic in organizational change discourses (Marshak, 2006).

Organizational change discourses must also be adapted to the modes that predominantly shape meaning in the community (e.g. department, profession, stakeholder group) that a change agent tries to influence (Kress, 2010). For example, a company can express fatalities at work using a bar chart, or by showing photos and names of people who died. The bar chart may be suitable for an operational analysis by market analysts. However, the identification of colleagues who died may be more effective in changing an organization's

internal workplace safety discourse and practices.

The discussion of multi-modality suggests that the success of an organizational change initiative may depend on being able to effectively deploy discursive practices that draw on, for example, language, imagery, symbolism, cultural artefacts, music, space, and gestures to shape multiple levels, narratives of change, counter discourses, different groups of stakeholders and variety of underpinning power dynamics. Consequently, and in a departure from what is currently the prevailing thinking among those who take a discourse-based approach to organization change, researchers and change agents must take into consideration the potential for both linguistic and non-linguistic modes of discourse to impact on change processes and outcomes.

The Framework and its Cross-cultural Applicability

The framework described above translates recent discourse-based research into a comprehensive discourse-based model of change. However, the research it draws on has, to date, predominantly been conducted in western settings. Moreover, the description of the model does not explicitly consider the critical connection with different cultural models (Holland & Quinn, 1987). In short, it is unclear as to whether the framework is sufficient to understand change in non-western, and, in the context of this paper, Japanese organizational settings. For example, should the framework more explicitly acknowledge that:

- Japanese culture appears to pay more attention to modalities other than talk and text than North American, Northern European cultures?
- "Silences" may perhaps mean more in Japan than in North American, or Northern European cultures?
- Stories and narrative may have a different value in Japanese culture, such that this might impact on change related discourses?
- There may be more "indirect" and tacit or symbolic communication styles and modalities in Japanese culture than North American or Northern European cultures?
- Power relations might play out differently in Japanese culture, and this may

affect the link between discourse and power in the context of change related discourses?

In order to assess these sorts of questions, we will consider variations in cultural perspectives on change and discuss the applicability of the framework across these perspectives. While contrasting cultural perspectives is unavoidably somewhat stylized, it enables us to draw on extensive previous research and offers useful insights for assessing the cross-cultural applicability of the proposed framework. Though most of the cross-cultural research we consider does not specifically look at organizational change, themes do appear that are relevant to change and these have been extracted and interpreted in the reflections below.

Variations between a Western and East-Asian perspective relevant to organizational change are summarized in Table 2 ('Western' perspectives in the table are predominantly based on North American research). For example, based on previous research Americans feel more in control of their environment and their mental health is influenced more by a perception of control. East Asians appear more comfortable with complexity and contradiction, while Americans strive for simplicity and try to eliminate contradiction. Americans separate form and content, and seek objective (context independent) rules for logical reasoning. East Asians may see such reasoning as naive. Assuming the American research can be generalised, from a Western perspective the world appears relatively simple, composed of discrete objects that can be understood without undue attention to context, and highly subject to personal control. From an East-Asian or Confucian perspective the world is relatively more complex, composed of continuous substances, understandable in terms of the whole, and more subject to collective control. Nothing is understandable outside of its context.

Table 1: Perspectives of Organizational Change

Western Perspective	East-Asian / Confucian Perspective
- Focus on individuals and objects	- Focus on context
- People have individual agency	- Groups exert collective control
- Lively debate is desirable	- Harmony is preferable
- Ambiguity needs resolving	- Ambiguity is rule
- Can control environment	- Adjust to complexity
- Destination oriented (teleological)	- Journey oriented
- Continuity unless disturbed	- Continuous change is the rule

(Based on: Greenfield, 2005; Marshak, 2012; Nisbett, 2004)

There is no suggestion that these different perspectives are fixed. The above-listed variations can be influenced quite easily through intercultural experience or even 'cognitive priming'. For example, research among citizens in Hong Kong has shown that biases can be triggered easily and subconsciously by anchoring thought with showing either a Chinese or Western image prior to a test, or the selection of either Chinese or English as the language of questions (Nisbett, 2004). Further, the two-way exchange between Western and East-Asian countries has given rise to increasing cross-pollination of ideas and philosophies for at least 30-40 years.

An initial reflection suggests that an interpretive and discourse-based model of change offers significant cross-cultural applicability. The importance of context and culture is used as a detailed example. Previous research suggests that East Asians are more context sensitive than North Americans. For example, research has shown that in judging people's emotions from facial expressions Japanese more than Westerners draw on information from the social context: 72% of Japanese and only 28% of American students stated they could not ignore emotions from people in the background of the image (Ito, Masuda, & Li, 2013; Masuda et al., 2008). Also, while Americans were found to be more sensitive to changes in a focal object, East Asians were more sensitive to changes in context (Masuda & Nisbett, 2006). A discourse-based model of change draws attention to the role of a context constituted by multiple levels of discourses and expressed in a variety of modes. While not ignoring an individual or object, it acknowledges that these are constructs whose meaning depends on their context. This suggests that the proposed discourse-based model of change is applicable

to East-Asian cultural settings.

Similar arguments can be made for other variations of cultural perspectives on change listed in Table 2. For example, a critical perspective on discourse can be inclusive of forms of individual agency (Western) as well as collective (East Asian) control. It sees power not simply as emanating from a central or sovereign source but acknowledges that each actor in a system has varying degrees of local agency and contributes to a continuous dynamic that holds meaning in place or produces alternative meanings (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). Further, the underlying dynamic of socially negotiating meaning and constructing prevailing narratives of change can serve to better understand cultural preferences in negotiation strategy and include both the lively debates emphasized by Western perspectives, as well as an East-Asian emphasis of maintaining harmony. Also, from a discourse perspective, the objective of the social construction of meaning is not to resolve ambiguity (Western), but to achieve sufficient convergence of meaning between decision-makers who may need to agree on their next step, that is, some level of ambiguity always remains (East-Asian). Trying to control a discourse appears illusive as alternative discourses, as previously discussed, typically will exist. However, it could be argued that a discursive perspective may simultaneously offer some control (Western) as well as some adjustment to complexity (East-Asian) through discursive devices like metaphors and other similes. These devices can shape discourse if used effectively, as well as help deal with complexity through simplification. Lastly, a discursive-based model of change comprises both continuity (Western) and continuous change (East-Asian) as it considers discourses as both iterative and recursive.

The discussion of the applicability of the cross-cultural applicability of the framework suggests that it will indeed be able to help develop useful insights, not just in Western organizational settings but also in relation to questions that are particular to Japan or other East-Asian countries.

Concluding Comments

This article has sought to demonstrate the potential contribution of an interpretive, discourse-based orientation to studying and managing organizational change. Specifically, it

has proposed a discourse-based analytical framework for understanding organizational change that we believe encourages a more applied orientation to organizational change amongst discourse scholars and a more scholarly orientation amongst change agents to the ways in which discourse can be constructive of action. The model invites scholars and practitioners alike to engage organizational change situations by asking questions and taking actions that other perspectives might not consider or even notice. In doing so it encourages them to take note of the social construction of organizational reality, different levels of discourse, prevailing narratives, power processes, counter discourses, reflection, multi-modality, and the iteration and recursivity of discourse. As such, the model legitimates and advances the interpretive perspective on organizational change that has emerged in recent decades. Importantly, the proposed model also appears to offer significant cross-cultural applicability. It suggests different or additional ways of thinking about change in organizations and the variables, that may be involved, and may encourage new ways of practicing change that are potentially applicable in non-western as well as western organizational settings, especially those related to an emphasis on context and the multi-modalities of discourse.

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